

24. The Fire

I shall try to write as calmly as possible. But when I raise my eyes, I can see a ceaseless fiery rain of sparks falling just outside my windows, and the constant cracks from the burning palace reach my ears like cracks from an exchange of gunfire.* I am writing with shaking hand and feverish head. Much of what I write will overlap with others, but that is unavoidable.

The message was brought to me at half-past six. There was a disturbance in the street, and as I dashed out, people were gathering in doorways and outside houses; I was greeted by a subdued fear, as if before an approaching earthquake. The sky was ablaze, and you could already see the flood of light, like a purple stream punctuated with dark smoke. By the cathedral the sparks were falling like rain. But still no-one knew where the fire was. People were shouting 'Christiansborg'. As I was running, whilst the flames rose red above a side street, I heard a long, female cry. It was a young girl, who fell forwards to the ground.

Then from Høibro Square I saw the flames shooting out of the palace roof. From the windows up here you could see tongues licking along the whole ridge. I went down and pushed my way once more through the crowd; people were silent and dejected. No-one spoke to anyone else. Women were crying and wailing. The fiery rain was as violent as if it was being thrown out of a crater; blown by the increasing gale, the sparks fell like a fiery snowstorm over

The Fire

Thorvaldsen's Museum,* over the church, over the house where I had been and the canal.*

I walked through St. Jørgen's Gate. The confusion was indescribable. You could hear repeated shouts for water, yells to save the collection of paintings. There was utter chaos. The pumps were working hard as soon as there was any water, but there was none. The fiery rain was falling so thickly over the palace square that sparks landed on your clothes.

The continual crackling of flames sounds like salvos of bullets. People are running pellmell into one another in order to save the most ridiculous things. I hurried up to the picture collection. By the windows the fire is so fierce that it can singe your hair. The light from outside is the only light in the gallery. People are storming in and out, tearing the paintings from the walls and throwing them on the floor in order to break the frames apart.

Opposite across the square the colonnade is gleaming like an Attic temple at sunset. We run around with a few dim lights in order to choose between the paintings, but it is impossible. The shutters are pulled open, so that we can see as much as possible; we pull down the pictures at random. I get hold of some small Dutch paintings, someone else grabs them out of my hands, and we go on in order to find others. Jerichau's statue of Ophelia is caught by the gleam,* and seems to come alive in the flood of light. The figure is prized from its plinth, which resembles a coffin when it is turned over. That is how it is carried away. The ceaseless booming betrays the fact that the fire is becoming more intense. 'The Panther Hunter' is carried down.* Calls of 'Hurry, hurry!' resound constantly through the gloom.

There is no panic here. Only a busily bustling nightmare. I go down the stairs. People are crowding up all the time. They throw the paintings down and go up again. There were paintings high up near the ceiling which could not be saved. One single figure was suddenly illuminated in the gloom by the gleam of the flames.

I went over to the other side of the gateway, up into the parliament building. It was deserted. A fireman ran past, shouting: 'There's no *water* here!' The corridors were awash with streaming water. I met no-one. Smoke began to fill the corridors, and it was completely black. I pushed my way through to the parliament chamber and inside it. In the ceiling there was a hole through which the flames were flickering down with licking tongues. And the whole time those little cracks of the fire up above, and right over me those small convivial flames caressing the cornices. It didn't look as if anything had been saved. Books and manuscripts were strewn on the tables and across the floor. You might almost think there had been a stormy meeting, which had degenerated into fisticuffs.

A man came running along the corridor with the intention of saving something or other. It was official documents, locked in a money chest which was

Journalism

so heavy that you couldn't drag it along. Two men tried to break it open. It was impossible. In one of the adjoining rooms an astral lamp was burning quietly in the middle of a coffee table. It looked homely.